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The Apostolical Method of
Preaching the Gospel

John Birt

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Birt

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Harvard Divinity School

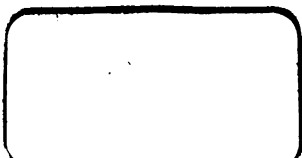


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THE APOSTOLICAL METHOD OF PREACHING
THE GOSPEL.

A SERMON,

PREACHED

AT THE ANNUAL MEETING

OF THE

Northern Education Society,

AUGUST 31st, 1814.

BY

JOHN BIRT.

HULL:

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AND SOLD BY

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TO THE
PRESIDENT, OFFICERS, AND MEMBERS,
OF THE
NORTHERN EDUCATION SOCIETY;

This Sermon,

PREACHED AT THEIR ANNUAL MEETING,
AND PUBLISHED IN COMPLIANCE WITH THEIR REQUEST,
IS MOST RESPECTFULLY PRESENTED

BY

The Author.



THE APOSTOLICAL METHOD OF PREACHING
THE GOSPEL.

A SERMON,

&c.

II. COR. III. 12. "SEEING THEN THAT WE HAVE SUCH HOPE,
WE USE GREAT PLAINNESS OF SPEECH."

WHEN required by this Society to prepare an Address for the present occasion, my thoughts were naturally directed to the circumstances of those young men, who, with a view to the ministry of the Gospel, are pursuing their studies, under its patronage, and who receive the instruction of my honoured friend the pastor of this church and congregation. Having to address myself chiefly to them, and seeking for a subject congenial with their taste and pursuits, it occurred to me that none would be more so, than the best method of preaching ; and that no pattern could be exhibited more worthy of their regard, than the practice of the Apostles. It is inconceivable that any preachers of the Gospel could possess superior qualifications, and we know that

none were more successful. It therefore becomes those who would be able and useful ministers of the New Testament, to study these examples; as far as possible, to ascertain the sentiments, and to imitate the conduct of these great preachers. Most of them had been educated at the feet of Christ; all of them had imbibed his spirit, and were replenished by large communications of his grace. They conducted their ministry, with his example fresh in their minds; and were constantly impelled and guided by his immediate influence. By him, their very words were suggested, and "grace was poured into their lips." In proportion then as we enter into their views, we shall be wise to win souls; and as we adopt their method, we shall rightly and effectually distribute the word of truth. The opinions and practice of the Apostles on this subject, may be collected from many passages of their writings, and amongst others from the text, which, in few words, furnishes complete information. The Apostle Paul, speaking on behalf of himself and his brethren, informs us:

I. That in their ministry, they used great freedom of address; and

II. Why this method of preaching was employed.

In the first place ; the Apostles used “ great plainness of speech.” No qualities, are more admired in the intercourse of social life, than candour and ingenuousness ; they have universal suffrage in their favour ; and all profess to exercise them. However far the practice of the generality may be from their profession, no one will withhold the tribute of applause ; and deceit is never so successful, as when it assumes the guise of simplicity and openness. There are, however, those, who will contend for the necessity of occasionally dissembling in civil affairs : but no one will be found to advocate the cause of insincerity in the engagements of the Christian Ministry. No one would be bold enough to say, that circumstances can possibly arise, to justify the use of concealment or disguise in the pulpit ; but you will allow me to observe to you,

1. *That, concerning this acknowledged and indispensable requisite, there have been many mistakes ; and some things have been adopted which ought carefully to be avoided.* You will find preachers, who, pretending to “ use great plainness of speech,” allow themselves the practice of great vulgarity. If they have a subject to illustrate, they introduce the most familiar and low allusions, such as are

calculated to excite only gross and disgusting ideas ; and affirm that the matter is made very plain, when in fact it is degraded and debased. They are careful to select and use the coarsest language ; and make plainness of speech to consist in local and vulgar phrases. It is by no means uncommon that their manner is exceedingly rude and overbearing ; they deal much in personalities ; and seem desirous, chiefly, to irritate and incense some obnoxious individuals. To introduce the names of parties and persons, is a favourite custom ; and this is seldom done in a way of commendation. The mere statement shews, how very different all this is, from the conduct of the Apostles. These things not only fail to do good ; they create much evil. Many of the hearers will be disgusted ; and perhaps by that disgust be prevented from resorting to those places where they would receive wholesome instruction ; while those who, by the eccentricity of the preacher are induced to remain, will have their attention diverted from proper objects, and occupied entirely by the odd sayings of him who addresses them. Such preachers never communicate just representations of religion ; and thus mislead those whom they undertake to guide. How differently the Apostles thought and acted, is evident from passages

such as these: "whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus;" "in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;" and "giving none offence in any thing that the ministry be not blamed."

There is a species of vulgarity in which these men delight, which is of sufficient importance to justify a separate mention, and to which it would be unjust to appropriate any term of censure less than *buffoonery*. Under this term I include every thing ludicrous in word or gesture. Compared with this, other improprieties of the pulpit become almost pardonable. Than this nothing is more inconsistent and censurable. It is inconsistent, because nothing can be more serious than the Gospel; or more solemn, than the engagements of him, whose office it is, to announce the way of salvation to perishing sinners. It is deeply censurable, because it is awfully irreverent to God; and betrays a shameful indifference to the destiny of those that hear. If it occur but seldom, it is to be lamented; if it be a prevailing characteristic, it is to be abhorred. Should any of you unhappily adopt

diminished : for that which when combined and well directed is quick and powerful; thus diffused and thrown at random, becomes comparatively powerless. It will be well for those who follow the advice which is given to Timothy, " Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

To this may be added, but not with equal censure, a propensity to superfluous and excessive definitions and explanations. This, though a mistaken practice, may arise from the purest and best motives. To be understood in preaching is essential ; without this, a man had better not preach, because in all probability he is occupying the place of one that would be intelligible : but a desire to be understood, may carry us too far, and counteract our very purpose. There are some things which cannot possibly be explained by us; simply because God has not explained them to us. The universal Sovereign has a right, without furnishing an explanation, to demand our faith in doctrines which he has undoubtedly taught. This right he has exercised; and therefore every attempt to define what God has simply declared to exist, must be fruitless and injurious. With respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, how many

dangerous errors, and unhallowed passions, have arisen from the pretended explanations of men. The Scriptures declare that, the Father is God—the Word is God—the Comforter is God—and that there is but one God. We have the best possible reason for believing this; for God hath revealed it: but if we wish to know “how these things can be,” we shall surely be disappointed. This knowledge is not necessary, or it would have been afforded; and every attempt at explanation, has but exposed human ignorance and folly; while almost incurable heresies and distractions have arisen in the church.

Some things are already so plain, as not to admit of being rendered more so; and therefore every attempt at explanation tends only to obscure. The subjects proper for explanation are, those which consist of several constituent parts, which being reduced to their simple elements, become intelligible; or those which are represented by obscure and unusual terms, and which, by the use of a word or words of more familiar signification, may be more easily understood. Where neither of these occurs, it is worse than waste of time to offer explanations.

It frequently happens, that a subject is much beclouded by the very nature and terms of the definition, which is harder to be understood than what is professedly explained. When a doctrine is to be illustrated, instead of giving a simple and scriptural enumeration of its characteristics and properties ; the hearers are involved in a series of metaphysical obscurities. As an example, take the term Faith ; than which no subject has been more obscured by this kind of definition. To this may be ascribed, the great variety of opinion which prevails concerning its import ; which might have been, to a very considerable degree at least, prevented, by avoiding the dark sayings of human invention, and substituting a simple statement of the explanations which the Scriptures afford. If you attempt to define it philosophically, you become, infallibly, mysterious and unintelligible. Indeed the very circumstance of its having been the subject of so much scholastic definition, and difference of sentiment, has an injurious tendency : for many, hearing of this, perplex themselves by supposing it necessary to possess these definitions ; and take for granted that the word Faith, in the New Testament, has a meaning very peculiar and abstruse, and which it is almost impossible to

ascertain. If we adhere to the Scriptures, we may expect that the effect of our ministry will resemble that of the Apostle at Philippi, when he replied to the eager inquiry of him who said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Our hearers too, will understand the meaning of the term, and rejoice in the salvation with which it is connected.

It is often very laudable and even necessary, to furnish much illustration, and to exhibit a subject in various points of view, in order that it may be seen on all sides, and completely understood: but we are not to suppose that this is to be without limit or restraint. It is possible to accumulate illustrations, until the hearers lose the knowledge which at one period of the discourse they possessed, and which they would have retained, had the preacher known and observed the point at which to stop. To all such, is very applicable, the text which says, "Who is this that darkeneth counsel, by words without knowledge?"

The next observation to which I would request your attention, is,

2. *That, to true plainness of speech, there are some essential previous qualifications.* No man can use plainness of speech, unless he understand

the subject he proposes to discuss. If he be defective in this respect, his notions will be confused and obscure, his language without information, and his preaching consequently ineffectual. It is one of the most evident of truths, that no one can give what he does not possess : he, therefore, who is destitute of clear and precise ideas, cannot communicate them to his hearers. To fail here, is to want the first requisite ; and nothing else, however desirable and necessary in connection with it, can supply the deficiency. This knowledge cannot be acquired without diligent study ; which diligence should be employed chiefly on the holy scriptures ; because they are the repository of all the topics on which you have to treat, and of all the means to which you are to have recourse, for the purposes of conviction and conversion. That student is best informed, who knows most of his bible ; and he who preaches most scripturally, preaches most excellently. From this treasury, the preacher, as well as the private christian, is thoroughly furnished to every good word and work.

This diligent application you will not always find of easy performance. Many temptations to forsake the laborious path of learning, will present themselves : but you are aware that your duty and advantage urge you to overcome them.

all. In the Apostolic age, when miraculous gifts almost superseded the necessity of reading and study, the Apostle gave Timothy this exhortation, "neglect not the gift that is in thee:" and ever since that period, the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge, have been indispensably requisite, to eminence in the ministry of the gospel. Those of you who are possessed of quick and lively parts, will find it highly necessary to be on your guard against the wasteful tendencies of negligence and procrastination: for the comparatively easy and rapid manner in which you conquer difficulties, may easily become a snare. As to succeed, you need only apply: you will be in danger of suffering that facility, to produce a want of unremitted application; without which, no considerable degree of valuable knowledge can be acquired. The quickest and most capacious mind, unless replenished by study, having no resources, is soon exhausted and reduced to repetitions; and thus, you may convert the very power of acquiring knowledge readily, into the cause of your ignorance. If the intellect be more slow and tardy in its operations; this also, without circumspection, may operate unfavourably. Finding it very difficult to possess yourselves of the information before you, you may be discouraged, and tempted to abandon the pursuit. To this, you are by no means

called. Your being here, is proof that the society has evidence of your labouring under no absolute incapacity ; and it is very uncertain that quick parts are to be preferred to those which are slow. We are always most tenacious of that which we procure with the greatest difficulty ; and, therefore, if you acquire knowledge less easily, you will retain it more effectually. The man of vivacity forgets, and has to learn over again ; while you, having once learnt, value what cost you so much pains, too highly to let it slip. Besides, the very time occupied to gain it, gives it deeper root in the mind ; and, therefore, it may be a question, if on the whole, the man of lively parts does not labour more for the possession of a given degree of lasting knowledge, than he who is more slow. At any rate, it is very possible that the tardiness which you lament, may be your unspeakable advantage.

All your acquirements, however, will be unavailing, unless they include a considerable acquaintance with human nature. As your office is to enlighten and persuade men, it will be necessary for you, to possess some competent knowledge of their ignorance, prejudices, and depravity ; to ascertain the very quality and measure of their deficiencies and excesses ; with

the process best adapted to their removal. You will have to explore all the avenues to the understanding and the heart; to detect and unravel all the sophistry and artifice, by which men justify their crimes, emblazon their vices, and exclude the light of truth. You will have to study fit topics and seasons; when to advance directly, when circuitously, and when to make a temporary retreat. To none does there open, a field of knowledge so wide and so varied, as to the christian minister. Man is a being singularly constructed, and placed in singular circumstances, holding a kind of middle rank, between the Angels who have retained their innocence, and those who are fallen from their original elevation and purity; the preacher, therefore, should know how to adapt his discourses to all the peculiarities of his hearers. To him, the knowledge of human nature, is like the knowledge of his materials to the artificer and manufacturer; without which, all expectation of success would be ridiculous.

How shall this be obtained? In part by the cultivation of familiar intercourse with mankind, and especially with your own congregation.—Every opportunity unforbidden by prudence and discretion, should be embraced, to see men near, and in all their varieties; to observe the same men

in various circumstances; and how the same passions work in different men. Above all, study your own hearts; they will furnish you with the most effectual means of understanding human nature in its principles and motives. Instructive as the lives of others are, no book is so open to you as your own hearts. By observation, much may be learnt; but you will be liable to many mistakes, and much will remain very obscure: by reflection, you are admitted into the very secret of your nature. It is true the varieties of the human character, are as numerous as those of the human countenance; yet the nature and original propensities are the same in all. "As in water, face answereth to face; so the heart of man to man." You will find, that to be always alone, or to be always in society, are equally injurious to the christian ministry. Perpetual solitude would be like a division of the link which unites you to your kind: always in society, you would lose the habit of reflection, and the opportunity of improving the results of your observation. The knowledge of the mere man of study is useless, because inapplicable: that of the man who never retires, is equally useless, because it remains unapplied.

To induce you to employ your knowledge to good purpose, it is necessary to have a lively

feeling, of the vast importance of the truths you propose to enforce. It accords with common observation, that we succeed best in those things which have most of our hearts; this is eminently true in the preaching of the Gospel. If we do not feel, and feel strongly, we may inform, but cannot affect. Our statements of evangelical truth, may be exceedingly orthodox, but will not reach the heart: and as the heart is the great object, our preaching will be in vain. In order to succeed in this respect, it will be necessary, assiduously to cultivate personal religion. I need not here enlarge, on this, as a fundamental pre-requisite to ministerial qualifications; this principle has been adopted, and is acted on by this society, who have wisely determined to educate for the christian ministry, no one, who shall not have given credible evidence of his own conversion to God. Nothing, indeed, would be more incongruous and absurd, than to appoint unbelievers to invite others to the faith of the Gospel. You are perfectly aware that it ill becomes, the christian preacher especially, to be content with a moderate degree of piety: should he be so, there is reason to fear he is mistaken in supposing he has any. Were you to consider the subject only professionally, you would find powerful motives to cultivate a devotional frame of mind. This will make you feel tenderly

and strongly, and to experience before-hand those emotions which you desire to excite in your hearers. If, therefore, you considered only effect, the great test of eloquence, you would see and acknowledge the propriety of this practice. But you are swayed by nobler motives. The desire of your hearts is, "to watch in all things, to endure afflictions, to do the work of an evangelist, to make full proof of your ministry," in order that, at the end, each of you may say, "I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me, a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." The more you hate sin, the more faithfully and expressively will you depict its horrid deformity: the more you love Christ, in the more winning manner will you publish his excellency and glory: the more you feel on your own escape from hell, the more alarmingly will you point to the yawning gulph: the more elevated you are while you anticipate the joys of heaven, the more glowing and brilliant will be your descriptions of the bliss and lustre of the place. Thus shall you labour most effectually to excite in others, due hopes and fears, joys and sorrows; and thus shall you "save yourselves, and them that hear you."

It will be proper now to offer some suggestions

3. *On the means whereby plainness of speech may be attained.*

As the foundation of this, be careful that what you preach is the Gospel. Scrupulously avoid, preaching with a desire to obtain distinction, by the singularity of your opinions, the superiority of your talents, or any thing that is calculated to attract attention to yourself, instead of your message. Never substitute for the Gospel, any philosophical questions or human systems. Preach the Gospel of the New Testament, which our Lord meant when he said, "go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature." You have no right to claim the sanction of Jesus Christ, for that concerning which he gave no commission. Let your preaching comprise *all* the Gospel. By this, it is not at all intended that you should crowd your whole system of divinity into every sermon; to do which, would be directly the reverse of 'plainness of speech:' but let no part have undue prominence, and let none be reserved or faintly pressed. In the course of your ministry, you will introduce the whole of

“that faith which was once delivered to the saints :” and earnestly contend, not merely for certain favourite points ; but for all which it includes. You will remember, that to preach the Gospel partially, no more deserves to be called preaching the Gospel, than shewing some of the materials, deserves to be called exhibiting a building. The Apostle deduces his acquittal of being accessory to the ruin of his hearers, from nothing short of this fact, that he had not shunned to declare all the counsel of God. Let your preaching contain *only* the Gospel. Disappoint not them who “as new born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that they may grow thereby ;” and let it be your determination to know nothing but Christ Jesus, and him crucified. This caution will not be deemed unnecessary ; for, from the Apostolic age to the present, there has been a lamentable propensity to connect with the Gospel, human devices and traditions. You will do well, to refrain from following the steps of any of those who have already forsaken the simplicity and purity of the Gospel ; and at the same time to use circumspection, lest you slide into some new path. Observing these things, use “great plainness speech.”

As I am addressing persons who are engaged in studying the holy scriptures through the languages by which they were delivered, there will be no impropriety in offering one word on the rendering of our text. The word used by the Apostle*, though it undoubtedly includes what we generally understand by plainness of speech, appears not to be fully translated by it; besides, our version is not entirely free from ambiguity. In order to understand its import, we may refer to other passages, in which the same word is used, as “he spake that saying *openly* ;” “if thou be the Christ tell us *plainly* ;” “then said Jesus unto them *plainly* ; Lazarus is dead ;” “his disciples said unto him, lo! now speakest thou *plainly*, and usest no proverb.” From all these it appears, that the word is used in a sense directly opposite to enigma, parable, and allegory, and implies the complete absence and destitution of all concealment, reserve, or equivocation. In this way the Gospel was preached by the Apostles, who are offered as examples to you. To comprise the whole in one word, it may be said,—preach the Gospel evangelically. You know, that it is possible to recite evangelical truths correctly, without preaching in the strain and spirit of the Gospel. It will be your con-

* *παρρησια*.

cern, however, that your preaching possess, as nearly as possible, all the characteristics of that word which is, emphatically, "good news." In order to this,

Preach the Gospel *confidently*, without hesitation; as entertaining not the slightest suspicion of its infallibility. You will not suppose that it is intended to advise you to utter your own sentiments of the Gospel in a confident and dogmatical manner, as if your views were beyond the possibility of error: on the contrary, you are to refer every thing to the text of the Gospel, as the last appeal; and to have no confidence in your opinions, unless they manifestly possess this sanction. But you are not to transfer, either directly or indirectly, the fallibility of man to the word of God. You will never, for a moment, even appear to bring in question its authenticity: but every word and action will evince, your unhesitating reliance on 'the word of the truth of the Gospel.' "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" The Apostles, whose practice it was to prove their doctrines from the word of God, always assumed, in the completest manner, its sufficiency and divine authority; and you will never hesitate to unite your voice with that of him who said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of

Christ : for it is the power of God unto salvation, to every one that believeth."

Preach the Gospel *unreservedly* ; let nothing be concealed or extenuated. You will make your sermons faithful expositions of your texts, and not discourses formed to the taste of your audience. You will not refrain from introducing and pressing, peculiar and important doctrines; because they may be unacceptable to some of your hearers; always remembering that saying of the Apostle, " necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me if I preach not the Gospel;" and hearing the voice of the Lord to the prophet Ezekiel, " thou shalt speak my words unto them, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear." In short, however desirous you may be, to please as well as instruct; in your preaching you will imitate the Divine Being himself, with whom there is no respect of persons. Your sermons will be very explicit; so that without wilful inattention, it shall be impossible to misunderstand you. To use ambiguous and vague expressions; to disguise your real opinions by the use of general terms, or words to which you attach a different meaning from that which they commonly bear; or to adopt any method of dissimulation; is most unworthy of your office, and fatal to the legitimate end and design of the

Christian ministry. Let it be yours, solicitously to avoid, the guilt and condemnation, of them who "handle the word of God deceitfully." In order to this, regard the admonitions given by the great Apostle of the Gentiles to his own son in the faith, "I charge thee, therefore, before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long suffering and doctrine."

Preach the Gospel *affectionately*; in the very spirit which the Gospel breathes. It was sent by Him who is love, as the result and expression of his own nature. The Apostle calls it "the ministry of reconciliation." It had its origin in love; in love it is constituted; it works by love; and wherever it takes effect, there all animosity and discord are extinguished, and harmony and love have place. Not to preach the Gospel affectionately, then, is not to preach it evangelically. If you desire to succeed in your ministry, you will industriously cultivate an affectionate spirit; without which, you will do little good. You may alarm, but you will not persuade; and you will confirm more prejudices by austerity of manner, than you can remove by power of argument. To preach affectionately, by no means excludes

those topics which are of an alarming nature : on the contrary, it will enable you to introduce them more effectually. Let it be evident that you love the souls, and desire the welfare of men ; and even they who are not yet disposed to follow your advice, will listen with some degree of complacency. If your manner be severe, they will impute what you say to ill-nature, and either disregard or resent it : but they cannot refuse a hearing to the man who evidently, with disinterestedness and affection, labours for their good. You will thus gain their attention, and make way to their hearts, which will furnish the opportunity of speaking in the plainest manner, truths in general disagreeable and revolting ; and from which otherwise they would turn away. You know, such are the dispositions of most men, that they will bear the severest rebukes from those in whom they know love is the motive ; while they would resent the slightest insinuation from others. Here we are furnished with a perfect example in the person of the Lord himself, whose benevolence was without a shade, and which, beaming from his countenance and action, thawed the icy hearts of the officers sent to apprehend him by the iniquitous rulers of the Jews.

Preach the Gospel *earnestly*. True evangelical affection has nothing weak, yielding, or inanimate; it perfectly consists with the greatest earnestness and even vehemence. Indeed, an affectionate heart will most dispose to earnestness of manner. Assistance, faintly offered, and easily repelled, gives little evidence of genuine and strong affection. When a number of blind men are approaching the edge of a lofty precipice; merely to mention their danger, would argue very little concern for their safety. The man who sees his fellow-creatures in danger of hell, and is employed to warn them to flee from the wrath to come; if he cared only to discharge the letter of his commission, by delivering his message, would betray great want of affection for their souls. This will not be your case; you will not merely deliver your message; you will labour earnestly for its success. There are many things which words are inadequate to describe, and which are conveyed by tones and gestures; thus, while you are urged by an intense desire for the salvation of sinners, the very earnestness of your manner, will render intelligible, what is beyond the power of words to represent.

In the exercise of your ministry, it will be needful to prepare yourselves to encounter

many difficulties. Some you will find in yourselves ; some will meet you from without.— Those within, will arise, chiefly, from unworthy fears and false compassion. Sometimes your duty will require you to ‘ use great plainness of speech,’ when your feelings operate in a contrary direction. This freedom of address may oppose your temporal interest and comfort, by offending those who are able, and at present willing, to contribute to both. A powerful temptation may thus be formed on the side of your fears ; it need not be said, that it must be resisted and overcome. To obey the dictates of duty, will be extremely difficult, when the appeal is to your compassion. When you find persons in a calm and settled state of mind, having peace within, and feeling complacently towards all mankind ; when life is pleasing, and death is anticipated without dismay ; how painful to be constrained, to disturb this calm, to break this peace, to interrupt these enjoyments. Yet as this frequently amounts to nothing more than carnal security, the result of ignorance and pride, and the destruction of which is essential to their salvation ; you will find necessity laid upon you, to use that plainness of speech which is required to dispel the enchantment, even though it should be succeeded by grief and terror. The difficulty will considerably

increase, when such cases occur in the course of your visits to the sick. Then, when calmness is so important in every respect ; when the disease of the body is augmented by every degree of mental agitation ; when the feeble and sinking frame awakens all the softer feelings of your hearts, while surrounding friends, by looks of tenderness, anguish, and alarm, supplicate your forbearance ; you will need all your fortitude, and all your love for souls.

As you proceed, you will meet with perpetual instances of stupidity and inattention ; and frequently will you have to lament the consequent inefficacy of your labours. This is not at all wonderful, when we consider the singular occupation of the christian preacher. He is sent, to offer spiritual inducements to carnal minds ; to invite the slaves of sense to relinquish the present seen for the future unseen ; to dissuade men, generally, from the practices in which they most delight ; and to exhort every individual to divorce himself from his bosom, and darling propensities. That difficulties should occur, is therefore perfectly natural ; and all our consolation arises from this, “ the things which are impossible with men, are possible with God.” To arm yourselves against the discouragements connected

with these difficulties ; and to prevent the enervating and benumbing effects of despondency ; remember you are the instruments and fellow workers of God, who will care for the success of his own word ; your engagements are of the most serious nature ; and of them you have a most solemn account to render. It is true the ignorance, indifference, and callousness of men, are beyond your control ; but beware lest the charge of any part of them be laid upon you. Let no man be careless, because you are idle ; let no man be ignorant, because you withhold information ; let no heart be hard, because you are unfeeling.

It remains now, that we consider in the second place,

II. The reason which the Apostle assigns for the employment of this method of preaching.

“ Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech.” He ascribes it to the very nature of the Gospel, which absolutely requires this method, and to which no other would be congenial. Whenever the Apostle is called upon to illustrate the nature and properties of the Gospel, he delights to do it by a comparison with the law : to which

he evinces its decided superiority. As if it were not sufficiently to its honour, that it unspeakably surpasses the wisest and best human system; he declares that it greatly excels, a dispensation which also has God for its author, but which, as it was not designed for purposes of equal moment, was not furnished with equal qualifications. In the connexion of the text, he pursues this mode of illustration. From the undeniable glory of the law, which he styles 'the ministration of death,' and which he represents as veiled after the resemblance of the face of Moses when he descended from the mount; he argues the superior lustre of the Gospel, which is 'the ministration of the Spirit,' and where all is entirely unveiled. Then having such hope, he considers sufficient to authorise and establish, the use of "great plainness of speech." For the sake of illustration, we may divide the reason of the Apostle, into the following particulars :

We use great plainness of speech,

1. *Because the Gospel has indisputable claims on human regard.* It proceeds from the Most High; and to every one, it says, "I have a message from God, unto thee." If the word of a king possess authority and power; much

more the word of "the blessed and only Potentate." The Gospel reveals, what otherwise could never have been discovered. It tells of "heavenly things;" unveils the transactions of the world of spirits; and manifests God in the flesh. It contains nothing of a trivial and unimportant nature; nothing, the knowledge of which can be useless to men: but is full of momentous realities. All its contents bear the stamp and sanction of perfect truth: for every page was inscribed under the superintendence of the Spirit of truth. Therefore, those who rely on it, cannot be deceived; and all its declarations are to be admitted with most implicit faith. It has high interest, inasmuch as it is an authentic repository of the history and affairs of men; concerning whom it records the most remarkable and characteristic facts. It declares to us the origin of our apostasy from God; and delineates its awful influence on the children of men, in every generation. Its interest incomparably heightens, when we contemplate it as the history of the operations of God, in the redemption of the world. Here, we discover, "his purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus, before the world began;" we contemplate the grand machinery of the law, which formed but a part of the preparation for the accomplishment of great

and benevolent designs ; we behold the concussion of the heavens and the earth, to make way for the ‘ Desire of all Nations ’ and the sudden appearance of the Lord in his Temple ; we trace the operations of Divine Grace, in the mission, sufferings, and exaltation of the eternal Son of God ; we are made present at the effusion of the Holy Ghost, and hear him declare, that all these things testify the certainty of salvation to all them that believe.

Seeing, then, that the Gospel has the fullest evidence of its divine authority, evidence so complete, that it is almost impossible to admit the honesty of the man who pretends to doubt it ; that it is in every respect worthy of its Author, both as a divine production, and as an instrument designed to operate on human beings ; and that it is, on every account of the utmost importance to men ; we preach it confidently. We dare not treat it as a human system, the truth and utility of which may be lawfully and even laudably questioned : but always assert it as ‘ the wisdom of God, and the power of God.’

We use great plainness of speech,

2. *Because the Gospel was especially designed to do away all concealment and obscurity.* The

Apostle declares, that our Saviour Jesus Christ "hath brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel." The purpose of the law, was, to conceal much until the due time of revelation. It was designed that those who lived under that economy, should know many things; while of others they should remain ignorant. Enough was manifested for their salvation: but many of their desires remained unfulfilled. The vail was not removed; and therefore much still lay concealed. What they did see, made them eager to see more; prophets and righteous men vehemently desired to witness the day of Christ: but died unsatisfied. What was hid from them, is revealed unto us, and we have the congratulation of our Lord himself; "blessed are your eyes for they see: and your ears for they hear. For verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them." The purpose of the Gospel was to make all things known; this purpose it accomplishes; therefore, there remains no pretext for ignorance, no cloke for sin. The Author and finisher of the faith of the Gospel, denominates himself 'the light of the world;' and is

called by the man who was sent from God to testify concerning him, "the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."

There are systems, very beautiful as a whole, and in some particulars unexceptionable, which yet have parts inferior in symmetry, grace, and worth. When such systems, are exhibited, it will be desirable, to give the greatest prominence to that which has least to fear from inspection; and to withhold or disguise that which is defective: but to act thus with respect to the Gospel, would be most injurious. It is excellent and beautiful altogether, and in all its parts; therefore, to conceal the smallest portion would be to diminish its splendour and effect. Like the church which it is designed to form and to edify, it is a building fitly framed together: there is no deficiency; no excess. Every word of the truth is so necessary to the information and sanctification of mankind, that every degree of reserve ministers to ignorance and depravity. Your professed design, is the promotion of light and holiness amongst men; should you withhold the minutest portion of the Gospel, you would become, to a certain degree, the agents of darkness and of sin. "Seeing then that we have such hope," let us preach unreservedly.

In the course of your reading, you have found that the much admired systems of philosophy, prevalent in antiquity, were not intended for the common people. The design of the philosophers seems to have been, not the general diffusion of knowledge: but the creation of a sect, that should know more than others. They were more gratified by their own superiority, than by the improvement of their fellow creatures; therefore, they adopted mysterious terms, and conversed chiefly with those who had already become their disciples. Some things, indeed, were communicated to the vulgar, in order that they might feel their inferiority to their sages: but the higher branches of their systems were reserved for the favoured few. In their esteem, knowledge was a treasure too precious, to be commonly distributed. Even the Legal Dispensation was not entirely destitute of these characteristics. The ceremonies appointed for original Hebrews, were more numerous, solemn, and magnificent, than those to which proselytes were admitted: and there were worshippers of the inner, and of the outer court. You will not suffer yourselves to imagine, that in these, there is any thing like a precedent for the preaching of the Gospel. On the contrary; this system is designed wholly for all: and all its parts are designed for every one. Con-

templating all men as possessing human nature, and as sinners before God ; it adopts none of the distinctions which we have formed ; and knows nothing of the initiated and the uninitiated. Therefore all want of explicitness and fullness, is decidedly uncongenial with the Gospel.

We use great plainness of speech,

3. *Because of the important relation which the Gospel bears to the happiness of men.* Our Lord thus strikingly asserts this fact: "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." To suppose that the Gospel exists, only for the melioration and improvement of mankind ; is to entertain an opinion, very inadequate to its genuine import and design. Its purpose is, not so much to repair, as to renew : not to advance but restore. It is something, for which, the world is not merely the better : but which it is eternal death to want. This and this only is life eternal : for this alone communicates the knowledge of God and Christ. Without this, our ignorance, prejudices, and sins, will be our destruction : but a genuine faith in the Gospel, gives us a property in all things ; and opens to us the gates of endless bliss. This faith, com-

municates a new existence ; causes to expatiate in a refined and exalted sphere of enjoyment ; and is a well of water springing up into everlasting life. According as men embrace or reject this blessed gift of God ; they have power to become his sons, or seal themselves ‘the children of wrath’. Without faith in the Gospel, the pomp, the pleasures, the wealth of the present world, form but the gaudy and noisy procesion, which attends the immolation of an Indian widow : to the believer, the poverty, the obscurity, the afflictions of this life, are but the discipline necessary to form and mature the heir of glory. The Gospel is the only effectual refuge in trouble, guide in difficulty, and support in death ; and as we are placed where these trials perpetually occur, the well-being and happiness of men are deeply implicated in this great antidote of evil. So frequent is the recurrence of the seasons in which we need its aid, that were it withdrawn but for a moment we should feel its absence. Its importance and value in this life, are inferior, only to its importance and value in the life that is to come. From these considerations arises the great suitableness of the Gospel : thus it is brought home to our business and bosoms.— Were all these things constantly before our eyes, could we give way to levity of manner ? Could we jest at a funeral ; or strive to entertain

with jokes, a man who was uttering his dying groans? Yet this would be equally seasonable with the ludicrous performances of the pulpit. Or, while so many are perishing for lack of knowledge; shall we withhold that which is able to make them wise unto salvation? Shall it be said, that through our backwardness and obscurity,

“The hungry sheep look up and are not fed?”

While so many of our fellow creatures are on the very verge of eternal destruction, are we capable of being cold, inanimate, and careless, in warning them to flee from “the wrath to come?” Oh! what a painful spectacle is presented by the condition of mankind! What an awful summary, “the whole world lieth in wickedness!” You cannot be unmoved while you see so many of your fellow creatures “dead in trespasses and sins;” destroying themselves by that in which they are so infatuated as to place their happiness; nourishing in their bosoms the worm that shall never die; and feeding those flames which will never be quenched. Alas for men, who are sick of a mortal disease, and yet flatter themselves they are in perfect health: who indulge the hope of eventual salvation, while they are quickening their steps to eternal perdition! You are not left to unavailing com-

passion ; you are the ministers of him, who hath " the words of eternal life ;" and you are authorised to preach the Gospel, in which he declares, " him that cometh I will in no wise cast out." It is impossible you can speak too highly of the mercy of God, or of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is your duty to announce, that the Saviour of men has pleasure in their applications ; that he who is mighty to deliver, delights to exert his power ; you are to follow the faith of departed preachers, " considering the end of their conversation : Jesus Christ the same yesterday, to day, and for ever."

Knowing these things, will you conceal them ? Or will it satisfy you just to make mention of them, regardless of the event ? By no means will this be the case if you love your fellow men. If your hearts ever yearn over the awful condition of sinners ; if tears ever flow from your eyes because men keep not God's law ; if one spark of Apostolic affection for mankind warm your souls ; you will in the kindest and tenderest accents exclaim, " behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world !" The man who possesses worldly riches, or honours, or knowledge, may rejoice that but few are so distinguished : but the christian cannot lose in self-congratulations on

his own safety, his desire for the safety of others. If possible, he rejoices the more in his own escape, when he finds that many are partakers of the same blessing ; and, if he be the instrument of their deliverance, his joy is full. You, I doubt not, feel much of this ; you will consider all your sacrifices and exertions overpaid, if you be but successful in turning sinners from the error of their ways. Knowing that “ they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament ; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever ; ” the very hope that you may be the means of introducing some of your fellow creatures to the Saviour here and to heaven hereafter, is your ample recompence. In proportion to the fervor with which you desire the eternal welfare of men, your affection will dictate to you, the use of “ great plainness of speech.”

It is true the state of mankind at present, is very deplorable ; and must remain so, as long as they continue to disregard the Gospel : yet we use “ great plainness of speech,”

4. *Because we are justified in entertaining the most sanguine hope, of the eventual and complete success of the Gospel.* We may suppose the Apostle to have included in the meaning of the

term "hope," the existence and prevalence of that feeling in our minds, concerning the success of our labours. Ours is a hope not at all allied to distrust or uncertainty ; and differs from possession, only by an interval of time. It surpasses every characteristic of hope in the usual acceptation of the term, and has for its peculiar quality, that it cannot be disappointed. Your individual success, indeed, cannot be foreseen ; but the combined and final effect, shall undoubtedly be great and glorious. This "good hope through grace," rests on various and most satisfactory considerations. The Gospel is God's provision for the welfare of men ; and therefore cannot fail. Were it the production of wisdom less than his, there might be some defect in its suitableness ; were there any deficiency of power ; a superior agency, or unmanageable events, might counteract the end : but He is the Only Wise ; and no opposition can be effectual, while "the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth." Had the Lord designed to destroy the children of men, he would not have shewn them these things : and what can frustrate his purposes of mercy ?

In whatever view we regard the Gospel, we are constrained to recognise it, as a system admirably adapted to its end. It proposes to

convert and to sanctify, disobedient and unholy men : and for these purposes, it has the best possible qualifications. It is a treasury from which preachers may draw all they need, to gain possession of the whole man. It is an armoury, well supplied with spiritual weapons, formed for the destruction of the ignorance, obduracy, infatuation, and enmity of the carnal mind. It meets the impenitent sinner, in every direction ; detects and exposes him in every refuge of lies ; surprises him in his deepest privacy ; refutes his best concerted sophisms ; and assails him in his darling enjoyments : so that until the impression is complete and saving ; he is ready to exclaim with the ungodly King of Israel, " hast thou found me, O mine enemy ?" Is he awakened ; does he grieve ; is he alarmed ? The Gospel is at hand, with the overtures of mercy ; and the compassion of the Saviour. It dissipates all his fears, with this assurance, " be of good cheer ; thy sins which are many are all forgiven thee." Are you desirous to possess the Understanding ; to describe convincingly the folly and unfitness of evil practices ; and to enforce on the ground of wisdom and propriety, the duty of a return to God, and a holy life ; seek your arguments in the Gospel. There you will find examples of the closest and most cogent reasoning.

Would you address the Consciences of sinners; effectually warn them to flee from the wrath to come; impress upon them their accountableness to God, and the awful judgement they have to undergo? Search the scriptures, and there you will find the most alarming appeals. Not the thunders of Sinai; the desolations which God hath made in the earth; nor the appearance of one from the dead; could exhibit in more appalling colours, the abominable nature of sin, or the awful consequences of transgression; than the warnings of the Gospel. Seared indeed must that conscience be, which can resist an approach to the cross; where the sinner contemplates God's well beloved son, bearing the iniquities of men; and from which a voice proceeds, "if they do these things in a green tree; what shall be done in the dry?"

Would you resort to the Imagination; and convert that powerful engine of Satan, into an instrument of their salvation? Would you expel the unclean, to make room for the pure; and purging away all filthiness of the Spirit, replenish "the chamber of imagery" with objects holy and beneficial? Exhibit the lively pictures which the Gospel points. There, you have sin in all its deformity; and holiness in all its beauty. There, the excellent of the earth are

divested of every thing that obscures their superiority ; and the wicked, though adorned with gorgeous apparel and “ faring sumptuously every day,” are marked out as “ poor and miserable, and blind and naked.” There, is hell, with all its horrors ; and heaven, with all its glory. In adopting the representations of the Gospel, you cannot err ; for they are all lively, natural, and conducive to holiness.

Are you desirous to touch the Heart, to move the affections, and melt the soul to tenderness ? The Gospel does all this, by a display of the greatest and most disinterested love. What can surpass ; what can equal, the love of God in sending his son ; and the love of Christ, who gave himself for us ? What can move that heart which is unaffected by the condescension and grace, of him, “ who his ownself, bare our sins in his own body, on the tree ?”

For your encouragement, the Gospel contains numerous and infallible intimations of its incessant progress, and final glory. It possesses an internal and efficacious principle of life and growth. Its advances hitherto, may have been comparatively tardy ; but it has never stopped : and it shall proceed, till it pervade the whole earth. The grain of mustard-

seed; though the least of all seeds; shall become a great tree. The little leaven though at first hid, and its fermentation almost imperceptible; shall operate until the whole lump be leavened. The predictions which relate to the glory of the church shall all be accomplished, when her "sons shall come from far, and her daughters be nursed at her side." As it is written: "the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee. The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister unto thee; they shall come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory. Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows? The sons also of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee; and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet; and they shall call thee, the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel. I will make thee an eternal excellency, a joy of many generations. A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation: I the Lord will hasten it in his time."

The Father hath chosen in Christ, an incalculable multitude, from before the foundation of the world; he will accomplish the salvation of his elect. The Son, by the achievements of his mediation, hath redeemed unto God, out of all nations, so many as to satisfy the boundless benevolence of his heart: he shall not fail of his reward. The Spirit abides in the church, and operates where the Gospel is preached: his energies shall not be occupied in vain. Assisted by his influences, the weakest instrument shall become strong: the hardest and most inaccessible heart, shall yield to his demonstration and power. The Gospel under his agency is sharper than a two edged sword; it is able to penetrate the mailed heart of the most obdurate; and to divide the unholy union of the most attached to sin. Had we occasion to despair of success, exertion would be folly; were there only probability, our efforts would be languid, and have many intermissions: but in our engagements success is assured; therefore we preach the Gospel with earnestness. "We run not as uncertainly; we fight not as those that beat the air." "Seeing then that we have such hope," let us "use great plainness of speech."

FINIS.

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